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ABSTRACT

The author suggests that the emerging fields of social practice (such as recreation, social work, and adult education) must all go through a sequential pattern of research needs, first superficially, and then in ever deeper cycles. The six phases of these research needs are: definition of the field (survey and descriptive studies, census studies, case reports, demographic studies); differentiation of the field (comparative and exploratory studies, reports of artistic experience, need analysis); standard-setting (normative-descriptive studies, evaluative research, instrumental studies); technological refinement (experimental research, case studies, theory-building, action research); respectability and justification (historical studies, biographical research, field-evaluative and survey-descriptive studies, comparative studies); and understanding of the dynamics of the field (institutional studies, environmental studies, force-field analysis, systems analysis, and prediction studies). (MF)

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SEQUENTIAL RESEARCH NEEDS IN EVOLVING DISCIPLINES OF SOCIAL PRACTICE

-A Speculative Theory-

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[1969]

The Stimulus and the Response

During my career I have been associated with three emerging fields of social practice--recreation, social work, and adult education. And I have experienced criticism being leveled at each of them by scholars of older disciplines for the naïvité of their research. My first reactions to these criticisms were a combination of guilt feelings and defensiveness, which in turn were acted out in scapegoating. It was true that research in "my field" was mostly descriptive, with heavy emphasis on surveys, case studies, and reports of artistic experience; and it ought to be more analytical and experimental (guilt feeling). But we are pioneers who are so busy building a new field that we don't have the time to engage in more scientific research (defensiveness). Besides, it is really the fault of the older disciplines, especially psychology and sociology, that our research is in the state it is--they haven't shown enough interest in our field to bring their discipline to bear on it (scapegoating).

These pathological reactions began changing to a reaction of curiosity as I was working on my doctoral dissertation on a history of the adult education movement in the United States. I began seeing the growth of a field of social practice as a genetic process which proceeds as if by natural law according to an organically-determined sequence of phases of development. It struck me that a field of social practice may have developmental needs that change through the stages of maturation--and produce developmental tasks--as does any other organism. And so I became curious as to what the developmental needs for research are for evolving fields of social practice.

A further stimulus to pursue this curiosity has come during the last ten years from my doctoral students and their constant quest for research problems that would be relevant to the needs of the field of adult education. I am embarrassed to have to admit that until recently my main suggestions have been: (1) to look introspectively at problems and concerns they or their institutions have existentially; (2) to search the periodical literature to discover needs as perceived by the leaders of the field; and (3) to explore the research problems being studied in related fields for clues as to what our field ought to be

concerned with. I still think that these are good sources for building a master list of possible research problems. But what my students have been asking for is a criterion for helping them select from the list those problems that would be in tempo with the developmental needs of the field. And this we have not had.

My response to these stimuli has been to construct a speculative theory of sequential research needs in evolving disciplines of social practice. My method for constructing the theory might be called intuitive-deductive, since I intuitively speculated about the genetic phases of development of the three fields of social practice with which I have had direct experience, and then deduced what needs for research seemed to fit logically with the organic needs of each phase. I have emerged with a conception of "The six ages of a field of social practice" somewhat parallel to Erikson's "The eight ages of man."

Developmental Needs for Research

Phase 1: Definition of the Field

The first organic need of a field of social practice, I speculate, is for a definition of itself. As the pioneers of a new kind of social practice start becoming aware of the fact that they are doing something different (such as teaching adults rather than children) and start bumping into others who are doing much the same thing, they begin to get a sense of identification with one another. And then they start asking such questions as: Who else is doing this kind of thing? How many are there? Where are they located? What types of institutions are they in? What, exactly, are they doing and how? What are their objectives? Who are their clients? What terminology are they using to describe themselves and their work? Under what conditions are they working? What are their resources? What are their problems and concerns? What are their characteristics? In what directions are they moving? These and other questions arise out of the natural need for a new field to know itself--to become defined. A field of practice needs to be able to describe itself before it can present itself with integrity.

Accordingly, during this phase the great need is for descriptive research--descriptive surveys, census studies, case reports, demographic studies, and the like.

Phase 2: Differentiation of the Field

As a field becomes fairly secure about its self-identity it begins to experience a need to differentiate itself from other fields of social practice and to clarify its relationship with them. It has to be able to answer such questions that are directed to it as: Exactly how are you different from older, related fields of social practice in your goals, values, auspices, clientele, and methodology? In what ways do you compete with them versus complement them? What unique social needs are you meeting that can't be met equally well by established fields? What right do you have to claim special resources for yourselves? What specialized training or talents are required to engage in your field of social practice?

During this phase there is need for comparative studies that delineate roles and technologies among the fields of practice, exploratory research that probes boundaries, reports of artistic practice that establish uniquenesses of approach, and analyses of social needs.

Phase 3: Standard-setting

Once a field of social practice is clearly defined and differentiated from other fields (in a sense, once its right to membership in the applied social sciences is established), it becomes concerned with the problem of control. It now addresses itself to such questions as: What are the standards of practice now observed? What should be the minimum standards of practice? What outcomes are actually being achieved through our practice? What are appropriate criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of our practice? What procedures should we be using for measuring our effectiveness? What sanctions are available and effective in maintaining accepted standards? How should training institutions be accredited and practitioners be certified?

During this phase the greatest need is for normative-descriptive research which yields insight as to desirable standards, evaluative research which appraises the outcomes of both training and practice, and instrumental research which provides improved tools and procedures of measurement.

Phase 4: Technological Refinement

As a field begins to get feedback from its evaluative research it discovers areas of weakness in its technology; many of the methods it has been using are found not to be producing the desired outcomes. And so a need develops for improvement of its technology.

During this phase the need is for experimental research which tests the relative effectiveness of different approaches, case studies which deepen the understanding of the dynamics of the technology, speculative theory-building which opens up new vistas of technology, and action-research which continuously infuses the technology with the insights of reality.

Phase 5: Respectability and Justification

As a field gains the stability that comes from definition, differentiation, standard-setting, and technological refinement, it develops a need for status and esteem. In terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it has satisfied its needs for survival and safety and now strives for recognition as a field worthy of respect.

During this phase the need is for historical research which provides the respectability of accumulated experience, biographical studies which cast the aura of illustrious figures on the field, and field-evaluative studies which demonstrate the effectiveness of the field in accomplishing social ends. During this phase, also, there is need for a more sophisticated round of survey-descriptive and comparative studies to show how far the field has matured since its original definition and differentiation.

Phase 6: Understanding of the Dynamics of the Field

Once a field has become well established and is esteemed, it develops an organic need to understand the internal and external forces that are affecting its development. It now raises such questions about itself as: What are the functional elements of the field and how should they be organized into a unified system? What are the resistances to change in the field? What are the changes in society to which the field should be responding? What are the societal models the field should be trying to work toward? What are the processes by which the direction of movement of the field is determined; and what should they be?

During this phase the need is for institutional studies which will shed light on the internal structure and stresses of the field, environmental studies which will identify societal trends to which the field should be responding, force field analyses which will reveal resistances to change, systems analyses which will indicate the interrelationships among the elements of the total system, and prediction studies which will project alternative directions of future movement and test their consequences.

This conception of the developmental needs for research in a field of social practice can be summarized schematically as follows:

Phase	Organic Need	Relevant Research
1.	Definition of the Field	Survey-descriptive studies Census studies Case reports Demographic studies
2.	Differentiation of the Field	Comparative studies Exploratory studies Reports of artistic experience Need analysis
3.	Standard-setting	Normative-descriptive studies Evaluative research Instrumental studies
4.	Technological Refinement	Experimental research Case studies Theory-building Action-research
5.	Respectability and Justification	Historical studies Biographical research Field-evaluative studies Survey-descriptive studies Comparative studies
6.	Understanding of the Dynamics of the Field	Institutional studies Environmental studies Force-field analysis Systems analysis Prediction studies

Let me make clear two qualifications to the presentation of this construct so far. In the first place, I don't view the phases to be as distinct and separate as this method of exposition makes them appear. I believe that it may be functional for there to be overlapping between two or three adjacent phases. For example, while a field is working focally on its definition, there may be some work going on legitimately on differentiation and perhaps even on standard setting. But I doubt if research aimed at understanding the dynamics of the field (phase 6) would have much relevance or acceptability while the field is primarily concerned with defining itself (phase 1).

In the second place, I don't view these phases to be linear; rather, I see them to be spiral. I suspect that an evolving field needs to move through the six phases a first time fairly superficially and then to repeat them in ever deeper cycles. And I have a hunch that the time-span for each cycle is becoming shorter and shorter with the accelerated pace of social change.

The Uses of This Theory

I am presenting this theory in the hope that it will be used in several ways.

In the first place, I hope it will be put to a rigorous intellectual test. I have speculated on the basis of my experience, intuition, and logic. How do these speculations stand up in the light of your experience, intuition, and logic? Does the very notion of genetically-determined phases of development of a field of social practice make sense to you? If not, what alternate guidelines to the patterning of research make more sense? If the idea of developmental phases does make sense to you, how do my six phases hold up in your thinking? Would you put them in this sequence? Would you add other phases? And do you agree with my deductions about the relevant types of research for each phase?

In the second place, I hope that the theory will be tested empirically. I hope that researchers will try to apply it to the selection of research problems and will report whether or not it holds up as a criterion of relevance for fields in different stages of development.

In the third place, I hope that the theory will be tested analytically. I hope that some doctoral students will analyze the research that has been done in different fields of social practice since their inception to see if the research actually tends to fall into clusters in the categories projected by this model--and if the studies that deviate turn out to be perceived as irrelevant.

Finally, I hope that this beginning attempt will stimulate other research theorists to build better theories about the patterning of research to meet the needs of a field of social practice.

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